

Message Text

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C O N F I D E N T I A L NEW DELHI 13119

FOLLOWING TEL SENT NEW
DELHI INFO BOMBAY AND MADRAS
FROM CALCUTTA SEPT 30, 1975, REPEATED TO YOU FOR INFO:
QUOTE

C O N F I D E N T I A L CALCUTTA 2332

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PINT SWEL IN
SUBJECT: FLOOD SITUATION IN BIHAR

REF: CALCUTTA 2216

1. CONSULAR OFFICER DURING VISIT TO PATNA SEPTEMBER 26 CALLED ON CHIEF SECRETARY SARAN SINGH WHO SAID FLOODS HAVE DEVASTED AN AREA OF 120 SQUARE MILES. SINGH SAID AREA INVOLVED IN NORTH AND NORTHWEST BIHAR WITH POPULATION OF OVER 20 MILLION. HE SAID THERE HAS BEEN SERIOUS DAMAGE TO CROPS, LIVESTOCK BUT LITTLE LOSS OF LIFE. (THE LAST IS CONTRADICTED BY PRIVATE SOURCES WITH WHOM CONSOFF SPOKE WHO SAY THAT AT LEAST 100 PEOPLE AND MAYBE AS MANY AS 1,000 PEOPLE LOST THEIR LIVES IN PATNA CITY ITSELF AND NO ONE KNOWS HOW MANY MAY HAVE DIED IN OUTLYING REGIONS AS RESULT OF FLOODS.)

2. FROM CONVERSATIONS CONSOFF HAD WITH OFFICIALS AND PRIVATE SOURCES, FOLLOWING
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PICTURE OF PATNA FLOOD EMERGES. GOVERNMENT

OF BIHAR HAD STARTED TO REACT TO THE FLOODING IN OUTLYING AREAS AS EARLY AS AUGUST 20 WHEN FIRST REPORTS WERE RECEIVED OF SERIOUS FLOODING IN THE NORTH AND NORTHWEST. THE RELIEF OPERATIONS WERE NOT COORDINATED NOR WERE THEY BEING FORCEFULLY IMPLEMENTED. ON THE EVENING OF AUGUST 24/25 PATNA CITY ITSELF WAS FLOODED WITH LITTLE OR NO WARNING GIVEN AS THE INHABITANTS; GOVT OF BIHAR AND PATNA CITIZENRY WERE CONFIDENT THAT THE CITY COULD NOT BE FLOODED SINCE IT NEVER HAD BEEN IN LIVING MEMORY. BY THE MORNING OF THE 25TH FLOOD WATERS RANGING FROM FOUR TO EIGHTEEN FEET IN DEPTH HAD COMPLETELY INUNDATED PATNA CITY WIPING OUT THE HOLDINGS OF MOST OF THE PATNA MIDDLE CLASS. GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS, INCLUDING THE CHIEF MINISTER AND CHIEF SECRETARY AND OTHERS, WERE MAROONED IN THEIR HOMES, SOME FOR DAYS, SO SHAKEN PSYCHOLOGICALLY THAT THEY WERE IN MANY CASES UNABLE TO HELP THEMSELVES OR OTHERS. FOR ALL PRACTICAL PURPOSES, UNTIL AUGUST 28 WITH THE ARRIVAL OF PRIME MINISTER GANDHI, THE GOVERNMENT OF BIHAR NEITHER FUNCTIONED NOR LED. IMMEDIATE RELIEF WORK PRIOR TO THE 28TH WAS DONE BY VOLUNTARY RELIEF AGENCIES AND PUBLIC CITIZENS.

3. AFTER MRS. GANDHI'S VISIT, INDUNATH THAKUR, WAS DETAILED FROM THE LAND REFORM OFFICE, BIHAR TO HEAD A SPECIAL RELIEF COMMITTEE, THE INDIAN ARMY SET UP A CONTROL ROOM TO MONITOR ALL REPORTS OF FLOODING, DAMAGE TO EMBANKMENTS AND ONGOING RELIEF WORK IN ORDER TO AVOID DUPLICATION OF EFFORT. THE AIR FORCE WAS CALLED IN TO FLY RELIEF MISSIONS. FOUR AND A HALF MILLION PEOPLE IN THE PATNA AREA WERE INOCULATED AGAINST CHOLERA FROM AUGUSTSWO TO SEPT. 8. THE GOVERNMENT OF BIHAR AT THAT TIME ANNOUNCED THAT MONEY WAS TO BE MADE AVAILABLE TO PATNA CITY RESIDENTS TO REBUILD THEIR HOMES. IN ADDITION GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS WERE TO BE GIVEN A MONTH'S SALARY IN ADVANCE, TO BE PAID BACK OVER A TWO YEAR PERIOD. FOR THOSE IN OUTLYING REGIONS, FUNDS TO RECONSTRUCT 250,000 RURAL HOMES (MUD WALLS AND STRAW ROOFS) WERE TO BE MADE AVAILABLE. THIS IS IN ADDITION TO THE 500,000 HOMES WHICH WERE TO HAVE BEEN CONSTRUCTED AS A RESULT OF LAST YEAR'S FLOODS AND WHICH HAD NOT BEEN COMPLETED OR STARTED. (IF IT IS ASSUMED THAT EACH FAMILY WAS COMPOSED OF FIVE PEOPLE--A LOW ESTIMATE--3,500,000 PEOPLE ARE HOMELESS IN BIHAR OUT OF AN ESTIMATED POPULATION OF 56 MILLIO .)

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4. MRS. GANDHI, PERSONALLY, AND THE EMERGENCY ARE RECEIVING CREDIT IN PATNA FOR THE FAST, EFFICIENT, AND GRAFT FREE RELIEF OPERATIONS NOW UNDERWAY. THE GENERAL COMMENT BY BOTH FOREIGN AND INDIAN OBSERVERS IS THAT WITHOUT THE EMERGENCY THERE WOULD HAVE BEEN LITTLE OR NO EFFECTIVE RELIEF OPERATIONS AND THE DEATH TOLL WOULD HAVE BEEN MUCH GREATER. CHIEF MIMISTER MISHRA HAS NOT RPT NOT BEEN BLAMED FOR HIS INACTIVITY PREVIOUS TO MRS. GANDHI'S ARRIVAL SINCE HE WAS ALSO MAROONED AS EVERYONE ELSE.

WE HAS EFFECTIVELY SUPPORTED ALL RELIEF MEASURES AND HAS BEEN TO NEW DELHI TO SECURE AID FROM THE CENTRAL GOVERNMENT. REGARDLESS OF WHAT PROMISES THE CHIEF MINISTER SAYS HAVE BEEN MADE TO HIM, REPORTS ARE THAT HE HAS BEEN TOLD THAT BIHAR WILL RECEIVE ONLY LIMITED ASSISTANCE AND THE STATE WILL HAVE TO HELP ITSELF.

5. AS OF SEPTEMBER 28 SOME AREAS OF NORTH AND NORTHWEST BIHAR WERE STILL UNDER WATER BUT WERE BEGINNING TO BE REACHED BY RELIEF OPERATIONS. FOOD DROPS HAVE BEEN MADE TO THESE AREAS BY AIR FORCE HELICOPTER. FOREIGN RELIEF ORGANIZATION AND LOCAL INDIAN SOURCES SAY THAT HUNGER AND FAMINE IN THOSE NORTHERN AND NORTHWEST AREAS WILL LAST UNTIL FEBRUARY 1976 WHEN THE NEXT RABI CROPS WILL BE HARVESTED.

6. ADDITIONAL RAINS WHICH BEGAN ON SEPTEMBER 25 AND WERE CONTINUING WHEN THE CONSOFF LEFT PATNA ON THE 28TH HAD TURNED THE CITY INTO A QUAGMIRE. THESE RAINS HAVE HOWEVER HAD BENEFICIAL EFFECT OF ENDING THE DROUGHT IN SOUTHERN BIHAR WHICH WAS POTENTIALLY ANOTHER DISASTER AREA. BUT THERE IS ALSO CONCERN THAT THESE RAINS WOULD AGAIN SWELL THE ALREADY CLOGGED NORTHERN TRIBUTARY RIVERS CAUSING RENEWED FLOODING AND FURTHER DAMAGE TO THE STRICKEN AREA.

7. THERE IS IN PATNA A VERY HEATED THOUGH, BECAUSE OF EMERGENCY, MUTED ARGUMENT REGARDING THE REASON FOR THE SWIFT FLOODING OF PATNA CITY ITSELF. ON THE NIGHT OF AUGUST 24, THE INDIAN ARMY BLEW UP THE EMBANKMENT AT DANAPORE 20 KMS. NORTH OF PATNA CITY IN ORDER TO DIVERT THE RAPIDS RISING WATERS FROM THE SONE RIVER. SOME SAY THAT THE EMBANKMENT WOULD HAVE BROKE ANYWAY WHICH WOULD HAVE BEEN DISASTEROUS TO THE SURROUNDING AREA (I.E. PATNA CITY); OTHERS AND PERHAPS THE MAJORITY FEEL THAT THE EMBANKMENT WAS BLOWN TO SAVE THE ARMY CANTONMENT, THE LARGE CONFIDENTIAL

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AMOUNT OF AMMUNITION STORED THERE AND THE HOMES OF THE ARMY PERSONNEL. BITTERNESS OVER THIS IS HARDLY CONCEALED.

8. COMMENT; BIHAR IS HIT EVERY YEAR BY FLOODS OR DROUGHT OR A COMBINATION OF THE TWO. THIS YEAR'S FLOODS ARE OF GREATER MAGNITUDE THAN THE ORDINARY, BUT WHAT IS REALLY NEW IS THE HEAVY TOLL THEY HAVE TAKEN ON PATNA'S MIDDLE CLASS ELITE. IN PREVIOUS YEARS' FLOODS MANY HAVE DIED AND MUCH DAMAGE HAS BEEN DONE, BUT THIS HAS HAPPENED OUTSIDE OF PATNA TO THE LANDLESS AND UNTOUCHABLES WHO ARE WITHOUT POLITICAL CLOUT. FOR THE FIRST TIME THE GOVERNMENTAL AND BUSINESS ELITE HAS BEEN HIT, AND MANY HAVE BEEN WIPED OUT FINANCIALLY. FOR THE MOMENT, THIS IS A MATTER OF PERSONAL TRAGEDY, BUT IN TIME IT COULD HAVE SERIOUS POLITICAL REPERCUSSIONS. IN ANY EVENT, CHIEF SECRETARY SINGH'S OPTIMISTIC FORECAST THAT BIHAR IS NOW "OUT

OF THE WOODS" AND INTO AN ECONOMIC TAKEOFF, WHICH HE MADE DURING MY VISIT TO PATNA ONLY A BIT OVER SIX WEEKS AGO, NOW SEEMS TOTALLY SHATTERED. THE AUGUST-SEPTEMBER FLOODS HAVE DEALT A DEVASTATING BLOW TO THE ECONOMY OF NORTHERN BIHAR. CALCUTTA AUTHORITIES ARE ALREADY BRACING FOR AN INFLUX OF DESTITUTE BIHARI PEASANTS, AND OTHER PERIPHERAL EFFECTS WILL ALMOST CERTAINLY BE FELT IN NEIGHBORING STATES IN THE MONTHS AHEAD.

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